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INTELLIGENCE OF EVIL OR THE LUCIDITY PACT /'THE MENTAL DIASPORA OF THE NETWORKS'

MASHINES HYPERREAL, INFORMATION MACHINE, SCREEN

Videos, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, Virtual Reality: interactivity threatens us on all sides. What was once separated is everywhere merged. Distance is everywhere abolished: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between the stage and the auditorium, between the protagonists of the action, between the subject and the object, between the real and its double.

And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles, means that nowhere is value judgement now possible anywhere any longer: either in art, or in morality or in politics.

By the abolition of distance, of the 'pathos' of distance, everything becomes undecidable.

When an event and the broadcasting of that event in real time are too close together, the event is rendered undecidable and virtual; it is stripped of its historical dimension and removed from memory. We are in a generalized feedback effect.

Wherever a mingling of this kind – a collision of poles occurs, then the vital tension is discharged. Even in 'reality TV' where, in the live telling of the story, the immediate televisual acting, we see the confusion of existence and its double.

There is no separation any longer, no emptiness, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unimpeded. You enter life itself as though walking on to a screen. You slip on your own life like a data suit. Unlike photography, cinema and painting, where there is a scene and a gaze, the video image, like the computer screen, induces a kind of immersion, a sort of umbilical relation, of 'tactile' interaction, as McLuhan used to say. You enter the fluid substance of the image, possibly to modify it, in the same way as science infiltrates itself into the genome and into the genetic code to transform the body itself.

It is the same with text, with any 'virtual' text (the Internet, word-processing): you work on it like a computer-generated image, which no longer bears any relation to the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. At any rate, as soon as you are in front of the screen, you no longer see the text as a text, but as an image. Now, it is in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right, never an interaction.

Similarly, it is only with the strict separation of stage and auditorium that the spectator is an actor in his/her own right. Everything today conspires to abolish that separation: the immersion of the spectator in the spectacle, '*living theatre*', '*happenings*'.

The spectacle becomes user-friendly, interactive. The apogee of spectacle or its end? When everyone is an actor, there is no action any longer, no scene. It's the death of the spectator as such. The end of the aesthetic illusion.

In fact, everything that was so much trouble to separate, to sex, to transcend, to sublimate and to metamorphose by distance is today being constantly melded together. All that has been wrested from reality we are in the process of realizing by force – there will always be a technique for laying hold of it and making it operational. '**You dreamed it, we made it.**' Everything that was so much trouble to destroy, we are today hell-bent on restoring. What we have here, in fact, is an immense reductionism, an immense revisionism.

In the sphere of the Virtual-of the digital, the computer, integral calculus -nothing is representable. It is not a 'scene', and there is neither distance nor a critical or aesthetic gaze: there is total immersion and the countless images that come to us from this media sphere are not of the order of representation, but of decoding and visual consumption. They do not educate us, they inform us. And it is impossible to work back from them to some tangible reality – even a political reality. Even war in this sense is no longer representable, and to the ordeal of war is now added that of the impossibility of representation – in spite of, or because of, the hypervisualization of the event. The war in Iraq and the Gulf War were vivid illustrations of this.

For there to be critical perception and genuine information, the images would have to be different from the war. But they are not (or not any longer): to the routinized violence of war is added the equally routine violence of the images. To the technical virtuality of the war is added the digital virtuality of the images.

If we understand war for what it is today (beyond its political stakes), namely the instrument of a violent acculturation to the world order, then the media and images are part of the Integral Reality of war. They are the subtler instrument of the same homogenization by force.

In this impossibility of re-apprehending the world through images and of moving from information to a collective action and will, in this absence of sensibility and mobilization, it isn't apathy or general indifference that's at issue; it is quite simply that the umbilical cord of representation is severed. The screen reflects nothing. It is as though you are behind a two-way mirror: you see the world, but it doesn't see you, it doesn't look at you. Now, you only see things if they are looking at you. The screen screens out any dual relation (any possibility of 'response').

It is this failure of representation which, together with a failure of action, underlies the impossibility of developing an ethics of information, an ethics of images, an ethics of the Virtual and the networks. All attempts in that direction inevitably fail. All that remains is the mental diaspora of images and the extravagant performance of the medium.

Susan Sontag tells a good story about this pre-eminence of the medium and of images: as she is sitting in front of the television watching the moon landing, the people she is watching with tell her they don't believe it at all. '*But what are you watching, then?*' she asks. '*Oh, we're watching television!*' Fantastic: they do not see the moon; they see only the screen showing the moon. They do not see the message; they see only the image.

Ultimately, contrary to what Susan Sontag thinks, only intellectuals believe in the ascendancy of meaning; 'people' believe only in the ascendancy of signs. They long ago said goodbye to reality. They have gone over, body and soul, to the spectacular.

What are we to do with an interactive world in which the demarcation line between subject and object is virtually abolished? That world can no longer either be reflected or represented; it can only be refracted or diffracted now by operations that are, without distinction, operations of brain and screen – the mental operations of a brain that has itself become a screen.

The other side of this **Integral Reality** is that everything operates in an integrated circuit. In the information media – and in our heads too – the image-feedback dominates, the insistent presence of the monitors – this convolution of things that operate in a loop, that connect back round to themselves like a Klein bottle, that fold back into themselves. The perfect reality, in the sense that everything is verified by adherence to, by confusion with, its own image.

This process assumes its full magnitude in the visual and media world, but also in everyday, individual life, in our acts and thoughts. Such an automatic refraction affects even our perception of the world, sealing everything, as it were, by a focusing on itself.

It is a phenomenon that is particularly marked in the photographic world, where everything is immediately decked out with a context, a culture, a meaning, an idea, disarming any vision and creating a form of blindness condemned by Rafael Sanchez Ferlosio: '*There exists a terrible form of blindness which very few people notice: the blindness that allows you to look and see, but not to see at a stroke without looking. That is how things were before: you didn't look at them, you were happy simply to see them. Everything today is poisoned with duplicity; there is no pure, direct impulse. So, for example, the countryside has become "landscape" or, in other words, a representation of itself ...*' |

In this sense, it is our very perception, our immediate sensibility, that has become aesthetic. Sight, hearing, touch – all our senses have become aesthetic in the worst sense of the term. Any new vision of things can only be the product, then, of a deconstruction of this image-feedback, of a resolution of this counter-transference that blocks our vision, in order to restore the world to its sensory illusoriness (with no feedback and no image feedback). In the mirror we differentiate ourselves from our image, we enter upon an open form of alienation and of play with it. The mirror, the image, the gaze, the scene – all these things open on to a culture of metaphor. Whereas in the operation of the *Virtual*, at a certain level of immersion in the visual machinery, the man/machine distinction no longer holds: the machine is on both sides of the interface. Perhaps you are indeed merely the machine's space now – the human being having become the virtual reality of the machine, its mirror operator.

This has to do with the very essence of the screen. There is no 'through' the screen the way there is a 'through' the looking-glass or mirror. The dimensions of time itself merge there in 'real time'. And, the characteristic of any virtual surface being first of all to be there, to be empty and thus capable of being filled with anything whatever, it is left to you to enter, in real time, into interactivity with the void.

Machines produce only machines. The texts, images, films, speech and programmes which come out of the computer are machine products, and they bear the marks of such products: they are artificially padded-out, face-lifted by the machine; the films are stuffed with special effects, the texts full of longueurs and repetitions due to the machine's malicious will to function at all costs (that is its passion), and to the operator's fascination with this limitless possibility of functioning. Hence the wearisome character in films of all this violence and pornographised sexuality, which are merely special effects of violence and sex, no longer even fantasized by humans, but pure machinic violence.

And this explains all these texts that resemble the work of '*intelligent*' virtual agents, whose only act is the act of programming. This has nothing to do with *automatic writing*, which played on the magical telescoping of words and concepts, whereas all we have here is the automatism of programming, an automatic run-through of all the possibilities. It is this phantasm of the ideal performance of the text or image, the possibility of correcting endlessly, which produce in the 'creative artist' this *vertige* of interactivity with his own object, alongside the anxious *vertige* at not having reached the technological limits of his possibilities.

In fact, it is the (virtual) machine which is speaking you, the machine which is thinking you. And is there really any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a free mental space, a space of freedom and discovery. In fact, it merely offers a multiple but conventional space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites, established codes. Nothing exists beyond its search parameters. Every question has an anticipated response assigned to it. You are the questioner and, at the same time, the automatic answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder – you are, in fact, your own terminal. That is the ecstasy of communication.

There is no '*Other*' out there and no final destination. It's any old destination – and any old interactor will do. And so the system goes on, without end and without finality, and its only possibility is that of infinite involution. Hence the comfortable *vertige* of this electronic, computer interaction, which acts like a drug. You can spend your whole life at this, without a break. Drugs themselves are only ever the perfect example of a crazed, closed-circuit interactivity. People tell you the computer is just a handier, more complex kind of **typewriter**. But that isn't true. The **typewriter** is an entirely external object. The page floats free, and so do I. I have a physical relation to writing. I touch the blank or written page with my eyes – something I cannot do with the screen. The computer is a prosthesis. I have a tactile, intersensory relation to it. I become myself, an ectoplasm of the screen.

And this, no doubt, explains, in this incubation of the *virtual image* and the *brain*, the malfunctions which afflict computers, and which are like the failings of one's own body. On the other hand, the fact that priority belongs to the network and not to individuals implies the possibility of hiding, of disappearing into the intangible space of the *Virtual*, so that you cannot be pinned down anywhere, which resolves all problems of identity, not to mention those of alterity.

So, the attraction of all these virtual machines no doubt derives not so much from the thirst for information and knowledge as from the desire to disappear, and the possibility of dissolving oneself into a phantom conviviality.

A kind of '*high*' that takes the place of happiness. But virtuality comes close to happiness only because it surreptitiously removes all reference from it. It gives you everything, but it subtly deprives you of everything at the same time. The subject is, in a sense, realized to perfection, but when realized to perfection, it automatically becomes object, and panic sets in.

However, we must not look on this domination of the Virtual as something inevitable. Above all, we must not take the Virtual for a 'reality' (definitely going too far!) and apply the categories of the real and the rational to it. That is the same misconception as reinterpreting science in the terms of theology, as has been done for centuries, *not seeing that science put an end to theology*. Or interpreting the media in the Marxist terms of alienation, in socio-political terms from ancient history, not seeing that the course of history came to an end with the entry on the scene of the news media and, more generally, that it was all over with reality once the Virtual came on the scene. However, with the Virtual we find ourselves up against a strange paradox. This is because the Virtual can deny its own reality only at the same time as it denies the reality of all the rest. It is caught up in a game whose rules it does not control (*no one controls them!*)

The Virtual is not, then, the '*last word*'; it is merely the virtual illusion, the illusion of the Virtual.

There is **no highest stage of intelligence** – and **Artificial Intelligence** is certainly no such stage. We have already seen the media revolution being misunderstood when the medium was reduced to a mere instrumental technique. We see here the same misunderstanding of the meaning of the Virtual when it is reduced to an applied technology. People did not see that the irruption of both overturned the very principle of reality. So they speak of the proper use of the Virtual, of an ethics of the Virtual, of virtual 'democracy', without changing anything of the traditional categories.

Now, the specificity of the Virtual is that it constitutes an event in the real against the real and throws into question all these categories of the real, the social, the political and history – such that the only emergence of any of these things now is virtual. This is to say that there is no longer any politics now but the virtual (and not a politics of the Virtual), no longer any history but the virtual (and not a history of the Virtual), no longer any technology but the virtual (and not a technology of the Virtual). Not to mention the 'arts of the Virtual' – as though art remained art while playing with the digital and the numeric. Or the economy, which has itself passed over into virtuality, that is to say, into pure speculation. This upping of the stakes shows that the rationale for the Virtual does not lie within itself, any more than is the case with the economy, and that it constructs itself by headlong flight forward, as a simulation effect, as substitution for the impossible exchange of the world.

Conclusion: from the moment the economic is there for something else, there is no point making endless critiques of it or analysing its transformations.

As soon as the Virtual is there for something else, there is no point enquiring into its principles or purposes, no point being for it or against it.

For the destiny of these things lies elsewhere. And the destiny of the analysis too: everything changes depending on whether you analyse a system by its own logic or in terms of the idea that it is there for something else. We must have a sense of this illusion of the Virtual somewhere, since, at the same time as we plunge into this machinery and its superficial abysses, it is as though we viewed it as theatre. *Just as we view news coverage as theatre.*

Of news coverage we are the hostages, but we also treat it as spectacle, consume it as spectacle, without regard for its credibility. A latent incredulity and derision prevent us from being totally in the grip of the information media.

It isn't critical consciousness that causes us to distance ourselves from it in this way, but the reflex of no longer wanting to play the game. Somewhere in us lies a profound desire not to have information and transparency (nor perhaps freedom and democracy – all this needs looking at again). Towards all these ideals of modernity there is something like a collective form of mental reserve, of innate immunity.

It would be best, then, to pose all these problems in terms other than those of alienation and the unhappy destiny of the subject (which is where all critical analysis ends Up).

The unlimited extension of the Virtual itself pushes us towards something like pataphysics, as the science of all that exceeds its own limits, of all that exceeds the laws of physics and metaphysics. The pre-eminently ironic science, corresponding to a state in which things reach a pitch that is simultaneously paroxystic and parodic.

Can we advance the hypothesis that, beyond the critical stage, the heroic stage (which is still that of metaphysics), there is an ironic stage of technology, an ironic stage of history, an ironic stage of value, etc.?

This would free us from the *Heideggerian view of technology* as the effectuation, and the last stage, of metaphysics; it would free us from all retrospective nostalgia for being, giving us, rather, a gigantic objective irony, a superior intuition of the illusoriness of all this process – which would not be far from the radical post-historical snobbery *Alexandre Kojève* spoke of.

At the heart of this artificial reality, this Virtual Reality, this irony is perhaps all we have left of the original illusion, which at least preserves us from any temptation one day to possess the truth.

excerpt from the book: *'The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact' / 'The Mental Diaspora of the Networks'* by **Jean Baudrillard**

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